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Integrating Style and Purpose in Leadership

Approaches to leadership should be more comprehensive than most of the current situational models, yet simple enough to be easily understood and applied. A combination of elements from prominent leadership models may be the answer.

In an article in *Educational Leadership* [March 1979], Thomas Sergiovanni criticized situational leadership models like the one proposed by Hersey and Blanchard for being "too simple" and encouraged "greater effort in capturing more fully the complexities of leadership effectiveness." Although Sergiovanni supported the situational or contingency approach to leadership as a definite improvement over those that prescribe a single leadership style as always effective, he expressed serious reservations about some of the training programs based on these models.¹

In spite of finding considerable merit in many of these leadership models, I share the concerns expressed in Sergiovanni's excellent article. We need a more comprehensive approach that links the "instrumental or managerial aspects of leadership . . . with the more substantive aspects of leadership."² We cannot promote superficial, unrealistic strategies that produce leaders skilled in moving people in directions that have no meaning and that change indiscriminately and without purpose.

Attempts to develop a comprehensive perspective should not overlook the appeal of the simpler

models: they are logical, easy to visualize and understand, and almost immediately applicable in the educational organizations where most of us work. Critics who advise us that the simple models have missing pieces, but do not suggest where and how they fit, do not contribute to the creation of unified perspective. The developers and promoters of the simple models, on the other hand, may avoid introducing elements that do not fit neatly into their models and training programs.

As a participant in the leadership exploration that Sergiovanni encourages, I will propose an approach to leadership that is more comprehensive than most of the current situational models, yet simple enough to be easily understood and applied. This approach offers no new techniques or gimmicks, but neither does it introduce any new language or concepts. It provides a framework for looking at and thinking about leadership and represents an attempt

¹ Thomas J. Sergiovanni, "Is Leadership the Next Great Training Robbery?" *Educational Leadership* 36 (March 1979): 388-94.

² *Ibid.*, p. 394.

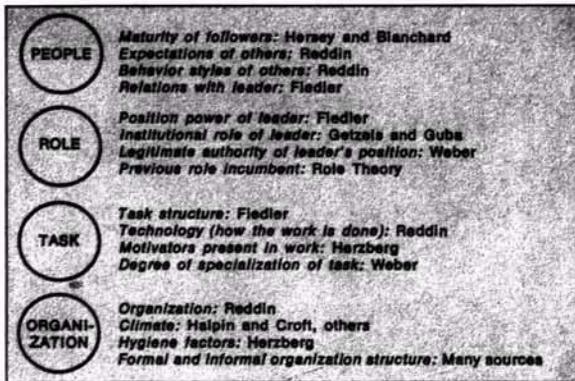


Figure 1. Situational Variables in an Organizational Setting

to link the instrumental and substantive components. My presentation will call attention to the relationship among three prominent situational leadership models and some important elements that they do not fully address.

Situational Variables

Situational models are based on a recognition that the appropriateness of any leadership style depends on the extent to which it is suited to the situation in which it is employed. While agreeing that each situation is unique, each model specifies different sets of relevant variables. Hersey and Blanchard focus on one variable (maturity of the follower), Fiedler on three, and Reddin on five.³ Each model presents a simplified picture of reality by drawing attention to only a limited number of situational variables. Such simplification is highly appropriate since few of us are capable of understanding and analyzing every factor that contributes to the uniqueness of a given situation. There is no reason for leadership trainers to deny the existence of other variables. Those who imply that all situational variables are included in their models are either dishonest or misinformed. They are not oversimplifying reality but misrepresenting it.

The situational variables proposed by Reddin, Hersey and Blanchard, and Fiedler, as well as most of those identified by writers who do not claim to be situationalists, can be clustered into four major categories: *people*, *role*, *task*, and *organization*. These categories and some of the variables they include are depicted in Figure 1.⁴

Effective leaders recognize that the more superficial the diagnosis of situational variables, the less it will contribute to sound decision making. Upon assuming a new role within an organization, they thoroughly analyze the situation and then bring this general awareness to bear on specific decisions to be made while serving in that role. Even though varying

circumstances may call for some behavior changes, they do not treat each encounter as an isolated event and attempt to continually alter their leadership styles accordingly.

Less effective leaders make decisions after quickly reviewing limited data and concluding that nothing else matters. They are likely to "buy into" a single, limited model and then make every encounter "fit"—instead of reexamining the appropriateness of their model of reality. Attempts to alter leadership style become a full-time preoccupation.

Decision Making

Selecting a leadership style is a form of decision making that includes electing to exercise leadership and determining the type of leadership that is appropriate. Although we discuss the process of selecting a leadership style, is that what actually occurs? Do we consciously say at one time, "Now I will exercise leadership," and at other times choose to exercise what we would classify as supervision, management, or administration? Probably not—we usually choose our behavior with no regard to classification and often without the opportunity to sit down and carefully examine the options at our disposal. Whether or not we classify our behavior or consciously examine the contributing factors, our decisions reflect our knowledge and values, as well as our perceptions (awareness) of situational variables (see Figure 2).



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³ For a more complete treatment of each model, see: Paul Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard, *Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing Human Resources*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1977); Fred E. Fiedler, *A Theory of Leadership Effectiveness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967); William J. Reddin, *Managerial Effectiveness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970).

⁴ Some of the variables listed have overlapping definitions and most terms have specialized meanings. Most of these concepts are presented in introductory texts for educational administration and supervision.

Values

Sergiovanni argues that leadership trainers often "overemphasize *how* one accomplishes something, seriously neglecting questions of value, mission, and worth."⁵ When carried to an extreme, this neglect leads to behavior comparable to that exhibited by John Dean in his capacity as Richard Nixon's advisor. Dean, according to his public account, increasingly suppressed most of his own stated values until a single situational variable, the expectations of his superior, guided all of his actions. Until Watergate, he was seen as a successful young man with a bright future. Although not fully conscious of the value judgments being made, his behavior reflected minimal concern for some of his values relative to honesty, professional ethics, and service to his country.

It is impossible for educational leaders to make decisions, including choices of leadership style, without making value judgments. Value is assigned to situational variables by considering one variable to be more important than others. By placing all situational demands ahead of their own standards, leaders abdicate their responsibility for the more substantive aspects in favor of the instrumental aspects alone. Leadership trainers neglect their responsibility to the educational profession if they suggest that leadership styles be selected solely on the basis of situational demands. Decisions must be based primarily on the purposes to be achieved—with an awareness of the situational implications for leadership behavior.

Knowledge

In the cognitive realm, leaders consider what they know or believe to be true about leadership and human behavior (for example, the effects of various leadership styles in different situations and the factors that motivate particular behaviors). Situational leadership models provide knowledge in the form of conceptual tools that assist leaders in understanding the relationship between certain situational demands and leadership effectiveness. Knowledgeable leaders possess many tools and have the ability to employ them appropriately. In one instance they might draw on Hersey and Blanchard by recognizing that the high maturity of the followers indicates the need for a low task/low relationship style of behavior.⁶ In a different situation they might rely on Fiedler by noting the favorableness of a situation (good leader/member relations and high position power and task structure) and seeing the appropriateness of a high task style.⁷

Leaders also base decisions on self-knowledge—what they know or believe to be true about themselves. They only select leadership styles they think

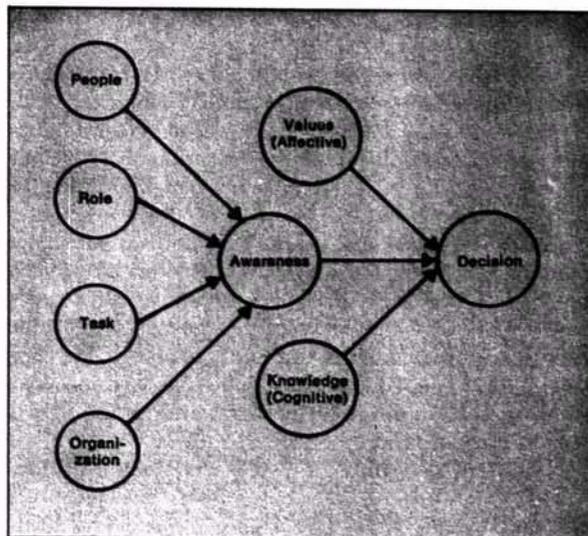


Figure 2. Decision Making

they can exhibit. Leaders with low self-knowledge, especially in the form of unrealistic estimates of their skills and flexibility, are likely to make decisions that cannot be carried out. Effective leaders are aware of their limitations and do not attempt leadership styles requiring skills they do not possess.

Awareness

Accurate perceptions of situational variables are necessary for making sound decisions. This awareness is a key factor that is often given only superficial attention. Leaders can only respond to what they perceive to be true about situational variables, and these perceptions are subject to error. A superior's expectations may not always be clearly stated. Followers do not wear labels indicating their maturity levels. Legitimate authority in education organizations is often unclearly defined. Learning the implications of maturity level for leadership style is much easier than learning to recognize maturity in other people. Assessing actual position power requires more than simply reviewing a job description. Leaders must develop skill in accurately reading situations if their knowledge is to be correctly applied. When perceptions are inaccurate, the resulting behavior is likely to be inappropriate.

⁵ Sergiovanni, "Is Leadership the Next Great Training Robbery?," p. 389.

⁶ See Hersey and Blanchard, *Management of Organizational Behavior*, chapter 7.

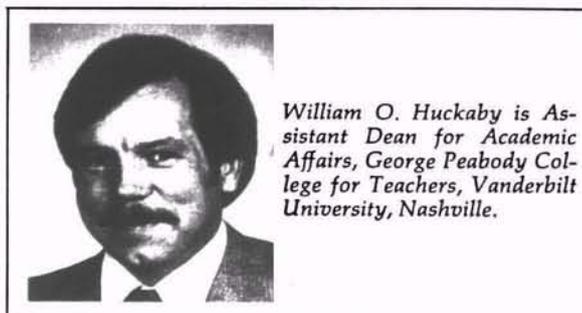
⁷ See Fiedler, *A Theory of Leadership Effectiveness*; or Fred E. Fiedler, "Responses to Sergiovanni," *Educational Leadership* 36 (March 1979): 394-96.

Decisions→Behavior

To what extent are leaders able to translate decisions into behavior? Can they exhibit whatever leadership style they choose? Sergiovanni suggests that most of us can only make modest adjustment in our leadership styles.⁸ Fiedler believes that the ability to change styles is limited because of the factors that motivate leaders: some are task motivated while others are relationship motivated.⁹ Reddin introduced the concept of style *flex* (the ability to alter one's basic style of behavior) and suggested that some people are capable of more flex than others. He considers this flexibility to be a positive characteristic when used appropriately; however, too much flex is seen as inconsistency, too little as rigidity.¹⁰

Leaders can only translate decisions into behavior to the extent that they possess the necessary task and people skills (see Figure 3), and any flexibility is limited by the level of skills that can be applied in a given situation. For example, leaders who are efficient organizers (a task skill) might be flexible enough to behave with a low task orientation by allowing the organizational structure for a task to emerge from within a work group. Leaders with poor organizational skills, however, cannot be flexible enough to provide efficient organization when a situation calls for it.

Although great flexibility may not be a prerequisite for effective leadership, limited flexibility is a serious problem for leaders with low self-knowledge. The high task/low people leader who correctly recognizes the need for a low task/high people style and attempts to behave accordingly will be ineffective if the necessary people skills are lacking. Those who attempt leadership styles requiring skills they do not possess are generally seen as either insincere (because behavior is erratic and out of character) or incompetent (because good intentions are not coupled with the ability to act upon them). Effective leaders do not attempt leadership styles of which they are not capable even if the situation demands such a style. In-



stead, they will try to alter the situation so that their own style will be more appropriate.

The educational leader who "can't put theory into practice" is usually the individual who understands leadership and human behavior on a conceptual level but who lacks the skills necessary for translating that knowledge into behavior. Consider, for example, the chairperson of a department of educational administration who cannot effectively administer departmental activities or the instructional methods teacher who lectures to a room full of disinterested students on the ineffectiveness of lecturing as an instructional technique.

Recommendations

Educational leaders have much to gain from training programs based on situational models like those proposed by Fiedler, Hersey and Blanchard, and Reddin. They have pointed to the important effect of situational variables on the appropriateness of a leader's behavior; identified several significant situational variables; and provided insight into the type of leadership that is effective under certain conditions.

If these models are to be of maximum benefit to the educational profession, we should treat them as conceptual tools that must be used wisely and carefully, knowing what they can and cannot do for us. To maintain a constructive perspective, we must answer for ourselves the questions not addressed by the models and develop the level of awareness that is necessary to make the models work for us when we do need them. We must learn to read situational variables more accurately and, at the same time, learn not to be controlled by them. Leadership styles must be selected with an awareness of the skills that are (and are not) at our disposal. Most of all, our decisions and behavior must be consistent with our values and shaped by our sense of mission and purpose. *ET*

⁸ Sergiovanni, "Is Leadership the Next Great Training Robbery?," p. 394.

⁹ Fiedler, "Responses to Sergiovanni," p. 395.

¹⁰ See Reddin, *Managerial Effectiveness*, chapters 20, 21, and 22.

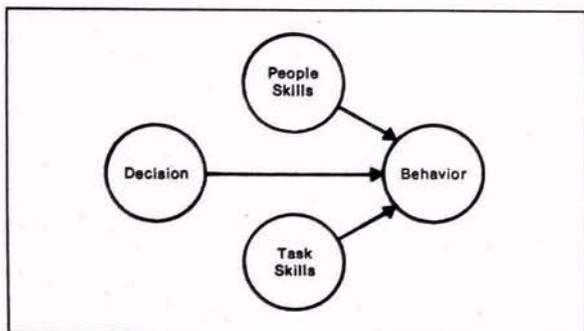


Figure 3. Translating Decisions Into Behavior

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